

Common Decency

"Are you going to fizzle out like foam?"

Est

The email had been sitting in my inbox for days.

I knew it was there. I could feel it like a splinter under my skin, impossible to ignore but too painful to touch. Every time I opened my laptop, my eyes would skate past the bolded subject line—RE: William Jakrapatr Exhibition – Confirmed Session Schedule—and I'd find something else to do. Edit old photos. Reorganize my memory cards. Stare at the wall.

Anything but read it.

But tonight, with the session scheduled for tomorrow morning, I couldn't avoid it anymore.

Note from client: Please bring equipment for both natural and artificial lighting setups. Artist prefers minimal direction during creative process documentation.

Artist prefers minimal direction.

I'd laughed at that, a hollow sound in the empty room. Of course he did. William preferred minimal everything when it came to other people. Minimal conversation. Minimal expectations. Minimal emotional availability.

And yet here I was, about to spend an entire day in his space, documenting his art, pretending my heart wasn't still bruised in the shape of his absence.

I couldn't do this alone. I grabbed my keys.

The stairs to Tui's apartment above Ink & Ashes were familiar enough that I could climb them blindfolded. The metal stairs leading up to Tui's apartment rattled under my boots, vibrating with the same frantic energy that was currently trying to claw its way out of my chest.

I didn't knock. I just pushed the heavy door open and stumbled into the living space above the studio. It smelled like old books, stale cigarette smoke. It smelled like safety, but right now, even safety felt suffocating.

Tui was on the floor, sorting through a stack of vinyl records. He looked up, took one look at my face—pale, wide-eyed, probably looking like I was about to be sick—and slowly set down a copy of a jazz album.

I dropped my bag onto his worn-out rug and sank onto the sofa, burying my face in my hands. "It's tomorrow, Tui. The first session is tomorrow morning. 9:00 AM."

"I thought you said the exhibition was in three months."

"The opening is in three months," I groaned, my voice muffled by my palms. "The promotional material needs to be done now. The catalog needs to be printed. The press release needs images. I ignored the attachment for three days because I was terrified to open it, and now I have less than twenty-four hours to figure out how to look at him without falling apart."

"Hot chocolate or something stronger?" he asked as I shuffled past him.

Tui sighed, the sound of a man who had expected this crash landing. He got up, his knees popping, and walked over to the mini-fridge. He cracked open a beer and pressed the cold can against the back of my neck.

I flinched, then took it, pressing it against my forehead. "I can't do it."

"You can," Tui said, sitting on the coffee table in front of me so I couldn't look away. "And you will. Because you're a professional, and because the deposit just hit your bank account."

"He wants 'Artist Portraits,'" I said, quoting the email that was burned into my retinas. "New concepts. Behind-the-scenes. Absence & Light. That's the title, Tui. It's like a sick joke. He's the absence, and I'm supposed to find the light?"

"It's a theme, Est. Not a biography." Tui took the can from me, opened it, and handed it back. "Drink. Breathe."

I took a sip. The carbonation burned, grounding me a little.

"I haven't seen him since I walked out of his apartment." I whispered. "He didn't hire a stranger. He kept the contract. He kept me."

"Because he knows you're the best," Tui said firmly. "Look, Est. You have two choices for tomorrow. You can go in there as the heartbroken boy who got ghosted, or you can go in there as Est Supha Sangaworawong, the photographer who is going to make William Jakrapatr look immortal."

"I don't want to make him look immortal. I want to shake him."

"Then do it with the lens," Tui said, his dark eyes locking onto mine. "You've told me a thousand times—photography is a conversation. It's aggression and submission. It's control. Tomorrow, you have the control. You tell him where to stand. You tell him how to look. You control the light. You control the shadow."

I pressed the heels of my hands against my eyes. "The session is at 9 AM. I haven't prepared anything. I haven't looked at the mood board. I haven't even decided what lenses to bring."

He settled into the armchair across from the couch, folding his long legs beneath him.

"So prepare now."

"I can't." The words came out cracked. "Every time I try to think about it professionally, I just—I see his face. I hear his voice telling me he needs to think. I remember standing in his doorway, asking for basic human decency, and him looking at me like I was speaking a foreign language."

"Has he contacted you since?"

I shook my head. "Nothing personal. Just the formal emails through his agent. Session confirmations. Equipment requirements. It's like the conversation in his apartment never happened."

Tui was quiet for a moment. "Maybe, for him, it hasn't."

"What do you mean?"

"William compartmentalizes." Tui spoke carefully, like he was choosing each word with precision. "It's how he's survived this long. The art goes in one box. The business goes in another. The personal stuff—the messy, emotional, human stuff—that goes in a box he buries so deep he forgets where he put it."

"And I'm in that buried box."

"You're in the box labeled 'too much to handle right now.'" Tui said. "Which isn't a reflection of your worth, Est. It's a reflection of his capacity."

"That doesn't make it hurt less."

"I know."

We sat in silence for a moment.

"How am I supposed to do this?" I asked finally. "How am I supposed to spend eight hours in his space, photographing his hands on a canvas, capturing his concentration, documenting his process—and pretend I don't feel anything?"

"You don't pretend you don't feel anything." Tui leaned forward, elbows on his knees. "You feel everything. You just don't let it control you."

"That sounds like a fortune cookie."

"What do you feel?"

"Hurt. Obviously. Angry, still. Confused about whether I have any right to be either of those things, since we weren't officially anything." I took a breath. "Scared. That

I'll see him tomorrow and everything I've been trying to process will just... unravel."

"What else?"

I hesitated. This was the part I hadn't wanted to admit, even to myself.

"Excited." The word felt shameful. "About the work. About the opportunity. About seeing what he's created for this exhibition. Despite everything, I still want to photograph him. I still think his art is—" I struggled for the right word. "—important. And I want to be the one who captures it."

"That's not shameful, Est."

"It feels shameful. Like I'm betraying myself by still caring about the professional side when the personal side hurt me so much."

"You're a photographer." Tui's voice was gentle. "It's who you are. Your eye doesn't stop seeing beauty just because the source of that beauty caused you pain. That's not weakness. That's integrity."

I let his words settle over me like a blanket.

"What if I can't separate them?" I asked quietly. "The personal and the professional. What if I walk in there tomorrow and I can't be objective?"

"Then you won't be objective." Tui shrugged. "You'll be subjective. You'll bring everything you know about William—his textures, his silences, his contradictions—into the way you photograph him. And it will probably make the work better, not worse."

"Or it will make me fall apart in front of him."

"That's a risk." Tui acknowledged. "But Est, you've been falling apart in private for weeks. At least if you fall apart in front of him, he'll have to see it. He'll have to reckon with what his silence has cost."

I hadn't thought of it that way.

"You're saying I should use the session as... what? Emotional confrontation through art?"

"I'm saying you shouldn't try to be someone you're not." Tui stood up and moved to sit beside me on the couch. The cushion dipped under his weight. "You're not a cold, detached professional. You never have been. Your photographs work because they have heart. Because you see people, really see them, and you're not afraid to put that seeing on display."

"William doesn't want to be seen."

"There's a difference. Fear isn't the same as refusal. He let you see him once—the portrait, the kiss, all of it. He chose that. He might choose it again."

"And if he doesn't?"

Tui was quiet for a moment. Then he reached out and squeezed my shoulder, the same gesture he'd offered a hundred times before.

"Then you take beautiful photographs anyway. You do the job you were hired to do. You prove to yourself that your talent doesn't depend on his validation. And you come back here afterward, and I make you more hot chocolate, and we figure out the next step together."

My eyes were burning. I blinked rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay.

"I don't know what I'd do without you."

"You'd figure it out." Tui smiled. "But you don't have to. That's the point."

We spent the next two hours going through the mood board William's agent had attached to the email. Tui pulled out his laptop and we sat side by side on the couch, scrolling through the reference images—stark compositions, dramatic shadows, intimate close-ups of hands at work.

I made notes on my phone. Lens choices. Lighting setups. The specific equipment I'd need to achieve the look the client wanted.

The client. I made myself think of William that way. Not the man who'd kissed me. Not the artist who'd seen my soul and painted it. Just a client. A job. A deliverable. It wasn't quite working, but it was better than nothing.

It's almost 2 AM when I finally leave. Tui walks me to the door, and we stand there for a moment in the cool night air.

"Thank you." It's not enough, but it's what I have.

"Always." He squeezes my shoulder. "Text me when you get home."

"I will."

I'm halfway down the street when my phone buzzes. I don't lunge for it this time. I don't hold my breath. I just pull it out, calm, and look at the screen.

It's Tui.

Tui: The portrait is going to be beautiful. You're going to be okay.

I type back: I know.

I don't know. Not really. But I'm starting to believe it might be possible.

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe that tomorrow would be just another session, that I could walk into William's space with my camera and my professionalism and nothing else. That I could document his process without being undone by his proximity.

The city hums around me. The night is dark but not empty. Somewhere out there, William is sitting in his penthouse, maybe looking at the same sky, maybe lost in his own silence.

I can't reach him. Not tonight. Maybe not ever.

But I can keep walking. I can keep taking photos. I can keep showing up for the people who show up for me. And that's enough.

For now, it has to be.

Tomorrow, I would see William.

Tomorrow, I would photograph his art.

Tomorrow, I would find out if the door between us was still cracked open, or if he'd finally sealed it shut.

7:30

I woke to sunlight.

Not the harsh, accusatory glare of an alarm I'd ignored, but the soft, golden wash of early morning filtering through my curtains.

I lay still for a few minutes, taking inventory. My body felt rested—more rested than I'd been in weeks, actually. The constant low-grade exhaustion that had settled into my bones since William's silence began had lifted slightly, replaced by something that felt almost like energy. My mind was quieter too. Not silent—the anxiety was still there, humming beneath the surface—but manageable. Contained.

I slapped the alarm off before it could ring a second time. I swung my legs out of bed, my feet hitting the cold floorboards. The shock was grounding. It reminded me that I was here, in my apartment, in my body. Not floating in some romantic limbo. I moved through the morning with the efficiency Tui had drilled into me the night before.

The shower helped. I stood under the spray longer than necessary, letting the hot water work out the knots in my shoulders, the tension I'd been carrying in my jaw. I washed my hair twice, conditioned it properly for once, even used the fancy body wash—something with sandalwood and bergamot that made me smell like a person who had their life together. I scrubbed my skin as if I could wash off the memories of William's hands, rinsing until the water ran cold. I didn't have my life together. But I could smell like I did.

My reflection in the bathroom mirror looked better than expected. The dark circles under my eyes had faded slightly. My skin had some color to it again. I looked like someone who'd been through something difficult but was coming out the other side. Good enough. I thought. Professional enough.

I dried my hair, applied the minimal skincare routine I'd learned from watching too many influencer tutorials during insomniac nights, and went to get dressed.

Choosing what to wear took longer than it should have.

I stood in front of my closet—a modest collection of blacks, greys, and the occasional dark blue—and tried to think strategically. What did a photographer wear to document a reclusive artist's creative process? Something unobtrusive. Something that would let me blend into the background, become invisible behind my camera.

But another part of me—the part that still remembered William's eyes on me, the part that still felt the ghost of his kiss—wanted to be seen.

In the end, I compromised. Black jeans, fitted but not tight. A charcoal henley with sleeves I could push up when I was working. My good boots, the ones with enough support for a full day of standing and moving. Simple. Professional. But the henley was soft, and the jeans made my legs look good, and if William happened to notice —

Stop it, I told myself firmly. This is a job. Treat it like one.

I grabbed my leather jacket from the hook by the door. The morning was warm, but the jacket was armor. I'd need it.

Breakfast was fuel, nothing more. Two pieces of toast, burnt at the edges. Black coffee, strong enough to make my hands vibrate just a little. I ate standing up at the kitchen counter, scrolling through my phone.

This is what normal feels like, I thought.

I'd been so focused on William—on his needs, his healing, his silence—that I'd forgotten to do this. Forgotten that I was a person too, with a body that needed feeding and a mind that needed quiet and a heart that needed tending.

I walked to the door where my camera bag sat waiting. It looked heavy, stuffed with the extra lenses and battery packs Tui and I had prepped last night.

I crouched down and unzipped the main compartment one last time.

The camera body sat nestled in the padded dividers. The sensor was clean. The cards were formatted. It was a machine that didn't know how to feel. It only knew how to capture light.

I repeated Tui's words like a prayer. If I started to feel the ache in my chest when I saw William, I would focus on the lighting. If I wanted to touch him, I would adjust the focus ring instead. If he tried to look at me with those soulful, apologetic eyes, I would put the camera between us and tell him to tilt his chin up.

I zipped the bag shut. The sound was sharp, final.

I hoisted the strap over my shoulder. The weight was familiar, comforting. It pulled me down slightly, grounding me.

I checked my pocket. Phone, keys, wallet.

Everything was ready. Everything was in order.

Now I just had to be ready too.

I took a deep breath, holding it in for four seconds, letting it out for four.

I wasn't going to see William, the man I loved.

I was going to photograph William Jakrapatr, the artist.

I opened the door and stepped out into the hallway, locking the apartment behind me. The lock clicked into place, sealing away the Est who cried in stairwells. He could stay home today. The professional was clocking in.

The session was scheduled for 9 AM. It was 8:25 now.

I had time—enough for my thoughts to spiral, for the anxiety to creep back in. I needed to stay busy, stay focused, stay in my body instead of my head.

I pulled out my phone and opened the mood board one more time.

The images were stark, dramatic. Lots of negative space. Lots of shadow. The kind of photography that required patience—waiting for the right moment, the right angle, the right quality of light. William's art was about absence, and the photographs needed to reflect that. Needed to capture not just what was there, but what wasn't.

I thought about his paintings. The ones I'd seen in his apartment, propped against



walls, stacked in corners. All those studies of negative space, of things left behind, of presence defined by absence.

And I thought about the portrait he'd painted of me. Charcoal on canvas. Raw and vulnerable and more honest than any photograph I'd ever taken of myself.

He'd seen me. Really seen me.

And then he'd stopped looking.

Information, not instructions, I reminded myself. The hurt was real. The confusion was real. But they didn't have to dictate my actions. I could feel them and still do my job. I could be wounded and still be professional.

I closed the mood board and opened my messages.

Looking forward to working with you. As if we were strangers. As if we'd never shared anything more than a business transaction.

Maybe that's what we were now. Maybe that's all we'd ever been, and I'd just imagined the rest.

I typed a message, deleted it, typed another, deleted that too.

Finally, I settled on something simple:

On my way. Should arrive by 8:50.

I hit send before I could second-guess myself.

The reply came faster than I expected:

Door will be open.

Four words. No emoji. No warmth.

But he'd responded. He was awake. He was expecting me.

I took a deep breath, shouldered my camera bag.

The dishes were drying in the rack. The bed was made—roughly, but made. Sunlight pooled on the floor by the window, catching dust motes in its glow.

This was my space. My life. Mine.

Whatever happened today, I would come back here. I would make dinner or order takeout. I would edit the photographs or stare at the ceiling. I would call Tui, or not. I would survive.

That was the promise I made to myself as I locked the door behind me.

You will survive this. You will do good work. You will remember who you are.

The city was already awake when I stepped outside—motorbikes weaving through traffic, vendors setting up their stalls, the smell of street food and exhaust mixing in the warm air. I walked toward the main road, my bag heavy on my shoulder, my heart heavy in my chest. But my steps were steady.

And for the first time in weeks, I felt ready.

The building loomed ahead, glass and steel catching the morning light. Seventeen floors up, William was waiting. I adjusted the strap of my camera bag, squared my shoulders, and walked through the lobby doors.

Here we go.